

Programme Notes



Monday 18 September 19:30

Afire (PG)



Set on the Baltic coast in the north of Germany, Leon (Thomas Schubert) and Felix (Langston Uibel) arrive at a summer holiday home so that Leon can complete his unfinished second novel and Felix can put together a portfolio of photographs. Unfortunately, they find the house occupied by outgoing, free-spirited Nadja (Paula Beer). Whilst Felix gives up on his photography in favour of what the summer might offer, Leon settles down to battle with his book and have a properly miserable time and emotions run high as the parched forest around them catches fire.

Through Leon, director Christian Petzold shows us a character who spends the film watching others – especially Nadja – but can only see anything through the fog of his own vulnerability: thus, he misses all the emotional charge and social dynamism which surrounds him. Leon also allows Petzold to explore our understanding of what it is to work: Leon thinks that work is serious but then only role plays this idea. Nadja happily sells ice-creams at the seafront which Leon grudgingly condones because of his feelings for her. Devid is a lifeguard at the local beach which is a step too far for Leon! Schubert's physicality is especially impressive in its dismissal of Devid in one particular point in the film. Leon's flaws sometimes cause the viewer pain, sometimes they are overtly comic. Schubert's performance is particularly affecting in how he plays on our sympathy.

Reviews

With his lofty pretensions and his rapacious need for affirmation, Leon is one of the most overtly comic characters created by the German director Christian Petzold. And on the face of it, Afire seems to operate in a lighter, breezier register than much of Petzold's previous works. Of course, this is still a Petzold film, so for all the superficial frothiness, there are churning currents beneath the surface that toy with darker themes – questions of mortality, of the nature of the creative process, of the looming climate crisis, in the form of the forest fires that rage just beyond the horizon.

Wendy Ide, The Guardian, August 2023

Petzold is less interested in creating a strong narrative than he is in charting the complexities of character and the ties that bind and lash, create and destroy. The movie could be titled The Portrait of the Artist as Young Douchebag, though the movie is more snapshot than portrait...

Manohla Dargis, New York Times, July 2023

Tracking these tense dynamics with an unerringly well-placed and fluid, intuitive editing, Petzold turns this scenically remote destination into an emotional and psychological trap. And also perhaps, a literal one: Afire, as suggested by its title and the regular noise of water-bombing planes flying overhead, takes place in the midst of an especially rough wildfire season. With its genre-adjacent premise, barbed character interplay, sharply chiselled performances and portents of meteorological disaster, Afire might be Petzold's most accessible work in some time.

Justin Chang, Los Angeles Times, July 2023

Cast

Thomas Schubert	Leon
Paula Beer	Nadja
Enno Trebs	Devid
Langston Uibel	Felix
Matthias Brandt	Helmut

Credits

Director	Christian Petzold
Writer	Christian Petzold
Producers	Anton Kaiser, Florian Koerner von Gustorf, Michael Weber
Editor	Bettina Böhler
Camera	Hans Fromm
Country	Germany
Running time	102 minutes

Film Facts

The original title was *The Happy Ones*, but there was a director who already had the rights: in German, the title is Roter Himmel. In English, it became *Afire*.

The story is based on a Chekhov short story, *The House with the Mezzanine*. It's about two artists—one a writer and one a painter—who spend their holidays in a rented house. They just sit there: nobody paints, nobody writes. Nearby, there's another house where two sisters live with their mother: one of the sisters is a communist and wants to change society. Both the men miss the chance of love.

In *Afire*, Petzold says that there are some traces of East and West Germany: "*for example, the names. The lifeguard's name is Devid with an 'e' and not an 'a'. People from the GDR yearned for the USA once the Wall had come down. They all bought Nissan cars and they gave their children American names, but because they couldn't speak English, they had to change 'David' so nobody thought it was a Jewish name!*"

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